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SUBJECT: MOVE TO LEGALIZE PROSTITUTION THWARTED

REF: SOFIA 00259

1. (U) SUMMARY: Bulgarian NGOs and their government allies, with strong Embassy and USG support, succeeded in defeating legislation backed by business interests and the National Tourism Board to legalize prostitution. This marks a victory in our anti-TIP effort. We will keep our guard up as proponents of legalization are likely to try again given the profits at stake. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Bulgaria has been a source country for human trafficking. EU accession, a growing economy, and the boom in tourism have contributed to Bulgaria also increasingly becoming a destination country for trafficking in persons, particularly for sexual exploitation. Prostitution is not prohibited by the country's law, but is also not legally regulated. In February 2007, an interagency working group led by Deputy Interior Minister Kamen Penkov began drafting legislation to regulate prostitution. The National Tourism Board, the strongest proponent of the effort, argued that the increase in unregulated prostitutes in the streets scared away tourists and that prostitutes should work in designated places and hotels. The drafting group kept a low profile, occasionally leaking statements highlighting the health benefits for the prostitutes and the tax revenues for the state budget.

3. (U) The Embassy mobilized against this draft legislation, spurring NGO's and individual members of Parliament and Ministry officials by warning that legalization would undermine GOB anti-trafficking efforts and give organized crime figures another way to legalize their activities. To raise the volume of public debate on the issue, the Embassy and Senior Coordinator for Public Outreach G-TIP Eleanor Gaetan supported an Anti-Trafficking conference on October 5 organized by former Foreign Minister Nadezhda Mihailova and supported by our NGO allies. The Ambassador was the first high level guest to confirm attendance at this event, encouraging others to attend. The press widely (and mostly positively) reported his remarks emphasizing the negative consequences of legalizing prostitution. Ms. Gaetan addressed the draft legislation more directly as a subject matter expert and outlined how legalized prostitution can harm women. Some senior GOB opponents of legalization also attended the conference and spoke out, including Prosecutor General Boris Velchev and, for the first time in public, Interior Minister Roumen Petkov.

4. (U) On October 18, EUR DAS Graffy spoke at an EU Anti-trafficking Day press conference in Sofia. Following DAS Graffy's spirited comments, Interior Minister Petkov expressed his personal opinion that legalizing prostitution "would be a big mistake." Petkov's statement that day effectively ended the efforts, initiated within his ministry, to draft legislation for legalization.

5. (U) COMMENT: Bulgarian anti-trafficking advocates have reached

consensus against legalizing prostitution and, with post's support, they have won over key GOB officials. We have won this battle, but the issue could resurface. There is too much money at stake, and too many vested interests for legalized prostitution to fade away completely. Our guard is up, as is that by an energized NGO community and anti-trafficking activists. We will bear down in reinforcing the message in public and private that Bulgaria has made significant progress in combating trafficking, and can do still more. END COMMENT.  
BEYRLE